

Mali: A Rich and Diverse Culture

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Malian culture, rich and diverse, is rooted in an age-old history. The region that now comprises the Republic of Mali was the cradle of great civilizations, whose fame expanded beyond the African continent at the same time Europe was experiencing a significant decline after the fall of the Roman Empire. For at least a thousand years, the country has been traversed from north to south, east to west by people carrying with them not only products, but also ideas and beliefs. This trans-Saharan trade brought Islam, which has progressively established itself in Mali since the 8th century, particularly in the Saharan and Sahelian zones. The wealth of the Ghana Empire (8th to 11th century), Mali Empire (13th to 15th century), and Songhai Empire (15th to 16th century) attracted the attention of the Muslim and European worlds, whose merchants and intellectuals came to Mali by the hundreds. In the course of these eight centuries, called the Golden Age, Mali made an immeasurable contribution to world history and culture. The brilliance of the University of Timbuktu (Tombouctou), for example, was without equal in all of sub-Saharan Africa. The ancient manuscripts preserved at Timbuktu's Ahmed Baba Center and in private libraries serve as eloquent witness to the influence of this city from the 15th and 16th centuries on. The Golden Age has also left us with evidence of artistic achievement—especially terra cottas of exceptional quality—that archeological research is gradually revealing.

Today, some fourteen ethnic groups live in the region, each with its own cultural traditions. The Moors (Maures) and Tuaregs are in the Saharan and Sahelian zones to the north. Along the Niger River are the Sonraï, Fulani (Peuls), and Boso (Bozo). A multitude of ethnic groups occupy the south: the Bambara (Bamanan), Malinké (Maninka), Soninké, Bwa, Senufo, Minianka, Khassonké, and Dogon, to name just a few.

These communities can be divided into two main groups according to their means of livelihood. The first group comprises those who are engaged in nomadism: these are the Tuaregs and Moors, goat and camel herders; the Fulani, cattle herders; and the Boso, fishermen. The second group consists of sedentary farmers who cultivate grains: millet, rice, corn, and other products such as cotton and peanuts. Although the Soninké are farmers, they also have been skilled merchants for centuries.

An exceptional cultural and linguistic diversity corresponds to this ethnic diversity. Each group is unique in numerous aspects of life—social and religious customs, art and crafts, traditions of dress, cuisine, and architecture—but they all have in common a social organization consisting of *hòròn* (usually translated as “nobility” or “freemen”) and *niamakala* (“caste members”).[†] Although this stratification has become less pronounced today as a result of urbanization, it remains one of the fundamental characteristics of Malian culture.

Ci wara, antelope headdresses, are used in ceremonies celebrating Bambara (Bamanan) farmers. Today they have become national symbols in Mali. Photo © Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History



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A woman playing a bowed lute in Timbuktu. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1959, EEPA 4419, National Museum of African Art

A Dogon woman carrying a locally made reed basket. Photo © Shawn Davis



The *jeliw*, or *griots*, are particularly important in Malian culture, especially among the Mandé-speaking ethnic groups. A highly skilled musician who may serve as either praise-singer or acerbic critic, the *griot* acts as the memory of an oral society, a repository of its political and familial history. The history of the Mali Empire, for example, is essentially known to us today through the accounts of the Mandé *griots*. The *griot* is attached to a family or to a political power, whose tradition he conserves and transmits to succeeding generations. As a consequence, the *griot* also has a significant role to play as an intermediary and negotiator between the different social strata of the ethnic group.

Besides the phenomenon of caste,[†] each person in Malian society, based on age and gender, knows his or her precise role in the life of the community. The elderly are always due respect and obedience, for they have been given wisdom and responsibility through long life experience. Women hold a special position, although it varies among ethnic groups. They are the guardians of tradition. Their daily activities center around domestic tasks—cooking and child care—and certain specific craft activities, such as pottery, are reserved for women who are the wives of blacksmiths. Westerners have occasionally presented Malian women as exploited, subject to all-powerful males, but the reality is more complex. Oral literature and daily experience are full of examples of women who play leading roles in Mali's political and cultural life.

The stratification of society into age groups, particularly through initiation societies, is also the basis for the transmission of knowledge, as well as the foundation of the practice of religious beliefs and rituals.

But make no mistake; Malian society is far from being rigidly hierarchical. The different clans or ethnic groups intermingle through

marriage and through *sinankuya*, a form of alliance deeply rooted in the Malian spirit that helps maintain the peaceful coexistence and friendship between communities and individuals. The groups between which *sinankuya* exists—Dogon and Boso, for example, or Fulani and blacksmiths (*numu*)—are obliged to help each other and exchange services; they also can joke with one another in special ways. This kind of relationship is widespread throughout West Africa; it constitutes an effective force for social cohesion that mediates and prevents conflicts between communities.

Malian culture is also characterized by an abundance of arts and crafts, as well as other forms of knowledge and skill. Of particular note is people's knowledge of their environment and the use of sophisticated herbal medicine that Malians have practiced over the course of centuries. They recognize the therapeutic values of plants and pass this information on from generation to generation. Despite the development of Western medicine—and due in part to the much higher costs of this medicine—traditional healing still plays an important role today.

Malian craftsmanship, one of the most dynamic sectors of the Malian economy, boasts an extraordinary diversity of textiles, wood sculptures, leather goods, works in silver and gold, as the result of an age-old tradition of expertise. This ancient knowledge has given rise to some of the most remarkable artworks on the African continent. Dogon, Bambara, and Senufo sculptures, among others, are among the masterpieces exhibited in European and American museums. But many of these sculptural traditions, which are largely tied to traditional religious practices, survive today only because of an increasingly strong demand from tourism. Other crafts, like pottery and textile weaving, survive because they are still central and useful in Malians' lives.

The wealth and diversity of Malian culture are also expressed in contemporary genres; Malian culture has become integrated into the modern world. Artists such as the painter Abdoulaye Konaté and photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé have achieved international success. Malian film-makers also are very accomplished and well known.

Last but not least, each cultural group has rich and varied musical and dance traditions. Internationally renowned musical artists such as Salif Keita, Oumou Sangaré, and many others have drawn upon these traditions as a source of inspiration.

It should be clear that Malian culture is deeply rooted in the past, and Malians speak of it with great pride. But times are changing. Despite efforts to keep this past alive, Malian culture is being fed today by a multitude of influences. A greater integration of Mali's cultural communities, through Islam, is tending to erase differences among them. In addition, the impact of television, tourism, and recently the Internet is in the process of creating—especially among the youth—the emergence of a world culture, whose arrival the older generations view with a degree of concern. ■



An intricately fashioned straw necklace imitates gold jewelry. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1959, EEPA 2535. National Museum of African Art

Ladji Tangara, a traditional healer, sells herbal medicines in a Bamako market. Photo © National Museum of Mali



† These terms are difficult to translate, and the phenomena they describe are complex. *Hòròn* comprise the nobles and all freemen with no manual profession other than agriculture. *Niamakala* are mainly occupational specialist groups, such as *griots* and blacksmiths. The caste system is essentially based on occupation and endogamy.